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SUSTAINABLE WILDERNESS: SUSTAINABLE BE-  
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Trumpeter

Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow keeps **Glenn Parton** from his job as a bearer of tidings glad, sad, and ecological in the wilds of Northern California. He can be reached at the post office: Box 1997, Weaverville, CA, 96093.

## Introduction

The sustainable development ideal - the goal of balancing human welfare and economic growth with protection of the planet's integrity and biological diversity - is an oxymoron. Any more economic growth, as advocated by the proponents of this ideal, contradicts genuine human welfare and planetary health. The deep, long-range interests of people and planet require massive deconstruction of modern society. Even a 'No Growth' ethic is inadequate because human beings have long since overbuilt the natural world.

## The Ideal of Sustainable Development

The ideology of sustainable development claims the middle ground between the extremes of environmental destruction and untouched, unpeopled nature. In fact, it is a form of environmental destruction because it overlooks or minimizes the critical role of big wilderness in supporting biodiversity. It is nonsense to call for the successful integration of wilderness-destroying human activities into biodiversity preservation strategies because, as Reed Noss, Michael Soulé, R. Edward Grumbine, and others have demonstrated, it is big wilderness that essentially preserves biodiversity.

Sustainable development marginalizes wilderness by pre-supposing a conception of economic health as endless human production. The proponents of this ideal would rather change the meanings of biodiversity, ecosystem health, and ecological integrity, than change the reality of a destructive growth economy. This entire coalition-building perspective has the structure of an addictive mentality that refuses to acknowledge its own problematic origin.

Sustainable development proponents cannot fathom the notion of progress backwards to a world far less controlled and manipulated by human beings. They stand for new habitats, containing new combinations of species, so as to continue human plans and projects that make nature conform to human will. The arrogance of this worldview reveals itself in low survival rates and numbers for many wild animals - large carnivores in particular. Proponents of sustainable development want to solve the biodiversity crisis through better business practices, which means that scientific truth is tainted by the economic bottom line.

Sustainable development involves a myriad of land protection categories, but not wilderness recovery because this idea is inherently subversive; wilderness recovery means the beginning of the end to 500 years of State-organized violence against Turtle Island. The wilderness recovery concept goes against the interests of the status quo, so they try to discredit it by claiming that there has not been true wilderness on the North American continent for at least 12,000 years (since humans crossed the Bering Land Bridge during the height of the last Ice Age). However, radical environmentalists know that any comparison between Paleo-Indian land management programs and sustainable development are worlds apart.

Traditional American Indians significantly altered their homeland, but they did not abolish communal land, i.e. common ground for all species. In other words, preconquest North America was not wilderness in the modern sense - that is, a continent free from human occupation and utilization, but it was wilderness in an aboriginal sense - that is, a continent shared equally by all its inhabitants (human and nonhuman). The English colonists did not imagine that they tamed a wilderness, they actually did tame a wilderness because they vanquished the force and power which holds everything together and that comes from everything working together. They changed nature from substance, i.e. that which exists on its own and supports all things, into resource, i.e. that which depends on and serves *Homo sapiens*.

The sustainable development model is bullish on putting a price tag on animals - farming impalas instead of cotton, offering special hunting licenses. In order to save many nonhuman species, the theory goes, people must derive monetary benefit from them. Nothing could be farther from ancient land management practices than this mentality of U.S. business and Western civilization. Sustainable development is a trick, an excuse, to convert the land into industrial processes and products under legal cover of reforestation and eco-enhancement schemes. Result: native peoples, around the globe, are cleared from the land, just like forests and wildlife.

## The Ideal of Sustainable Wilderness

I offer the ideal of sustainable wilderness: demanding human households (cultural and economic centers of activity) that are compatible with true wilderness. On the North American continent, true wilderness is exemplified by wildlife patterns of abundance and distribution before European invasion. In order to achieve this goal, we need new social institutions for small places and new economic strategies with small impacts, so that every large area of the North American continent (and elsewhere) remains or becomes almost completely wild. The sustainable wilderness vision is of a landscape that is wilderness overall; it contains humble and respectful human places together with the free play of

natural forces and faces that drive evolution.

Traditional Native Americans prove that true wilderness can abide people. Pre-Columbian North America was inhabited by indigenous peoples, yet each tribe was surrounded and supported by real wilderness. This is the essence of primitive society that we must recapture by changing our present industrial mode of life into nearly self-sufficient communities scattered across a primarily wild countryside. The model of village life handed down to us from our primal ancestors, where humans can walk quickly and easily into real wilderness, is the necessary human component of a balanced human/nature relationship.

Authentic village life entails face to face democracy where each person knows something about the values and interests of every other person. It is difficult, if not impossible, to remember names of more than several hundred people. The precious virtue of individuality - which has all but disappeared from the present Age - arises from membership in an autonomous community that is connected to the greater order of all beings by wild streams and rivers and other natural pathways. We need good social soil for growing sympathetic intelligence.

George Bradford reports that "‘going to the village’ is what Indians do when trouble comes."1 Today, big trouble has come to the modern world, and universities, hospitals, sewage plants, courts, jails, factories, ports, warehouses, and offices are not going to get rid of it because they are the tentacles of the monster. This monster is a way of life that kills wilderness. Calls for radical or dramatic changes that do not return us to our village-roots have superficial appeal; only indigenous peoples have been able to thrive in environments for thousands of years by overlaying culture on the pre-existing realm of nature. Russell Means makes the decisive point: "We don't want power over white institutions, we want white institutions to disappear - that's revolution."2

If technological developments will enhance human life without severing or weakening the ancient village/wilderness bond, then I welcome them (but history sounds a discordant note on this score). Here is the litmus-test for technology: Is it of the village, by the village, and for the village? Jared Diamond reports that traditional New Guineans live "so close to the forest that they can hear fifty bird species while still lying in bed."3 There will always be room for improvement in the daily and nightly lives of any people, but some experiences are so much at the core of human well-being that they cannot be replaced or surpassed. The poor power of technology must yield to the simple joys of wild nature.

## The Wildlands Project

The Wildlands Project is the best strategy for achieving the sustainable wilderness ideal on the North American continent. It rests on the intuitive premise

that true wilderness - "biological diversity with integrity,"<sup>4</sup> as Dave Foreman defines it - has intrinsic value, or a right to exist for its own sake. On this unshakable foundation is being mapped and built an interconnected system of ecological reserves that will protect the full complement of all (existing) native species. A motto for the Wildlands Project could be: biological reality should determine political reality. In other words, the preservation and restoration of ecological wilderness should become the basic standard for changing our modern lifestyle. This is a wise and workable approach for achieving harmony between human culture and nature because only the wilderness cause cuts deeply enough into human nature to potentially activate confused and weary people.

John Davis notes that it is not possible to superimpose an adequate ecological reserve system upon the existing socio-political systems of this continent. "Any decent road atlas belies such a hope."<sup>5</sup> It is time to ask ourselves this question: Are we preparing for the revolutionary dethronement of humankind, or are we to remain in ivory towers, apart from and above (we think) the plain members and citizens of this world? If the former, then the Wildlands Project should take us all the way to the sustainable wilderness ideal in which human places look and function as parts of a larger wilderness-body.

What are the far-reaching results of the Wildlands Project for human beings? The answer, in a word, is liberation. It is important to understand (and explain to others) that we are not limiting or sacrificing human welfare. Rather, we are expanding human freedom (beyond human egoism) by making it possible for people to come into the company and comfort of wild lives. True freedom, in contrast to the power to do what one wants, is the realization of one's potential to participate in, and contribute to, the elaboration and diversification of Life (in all its forms) on Earth. We cannot allow North American Wilderness Recovery to be framed in terms of wilderness and biodiversity at the expense of people. On the contrary, we are doing the right thing for ecosystems, plants, and animals, including people.

## Conclusion

Why the sustainable wilderness ideal of an unbroken wilderness matrix containing tiny human settlements, instead of the sustainable development ideal of humanistic nature containing island wildlife sanctuaries (perhaps repopulated by zoos)? Because wilderness is the real world. Reality is the actualization of potentialities.<sup>6</sup> It is both a descriptive state and a prescriptive state - that is, it includes both what a thing is and what it could be or should be. Only true wilderness provides the ground for all beings to fulfill their endemic potentialities. The sustainable development objective entails a reduction of reality because humans enrich themselves at the cost of other species; whereas, the sustainable wilderness alternative entails human self-realization that contributes to,

rather than subtracts from, the unfolding story of creative evolution.

1. George Bradford, "We All Live in Bhopal," *Questioning Technology*. Ed. John Zerzan and Alice Carnes, Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1991, p. 52.
2. Russell Means, "Fighting Words on the Future of the Earth," *Questioning Technology*, Ed. John Zerzan and Alice Carnes, Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1991, p. 79.
3. Jared Diamond, "New Guineans and Their Natural World," *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Ed. Stephen Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, Washington: Island Press, 1993, p. 255.
4. Dave Foreman, "The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act and the Evolving Wilderness Area Model," *Wild Earth*, Vol. 3 No. 4, p. 59.
5. John Davis, "A Plea for Political Honesty," *Wild Earth*, Vol 3, No. 4, p. 9.
6. See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

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